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Race, Industry, and the Aesthetic of a Changing Community in World War II Portland

HEATHER FRYER

Among the most fascinating aspects of the history of the American home front in World War II is the speed with which communities, institutions, industries, and individuals completely transformed themselves to meet the demands of the emergency. Portland is one of many cities whose wartime transformations permanently changed the community. The quiet, provincial city became the center of a shipbuilding boom in 1942, when the Kaiser Shipbuilding Corporation received generous government contracts to build two gigantic shipyards and to expand an existing Portland facility. The U.S. War Manpower Commission was quick to realize that Portland had nowhere near the labor force required to operate the yards on a 24-hour schedule. The commission designated Portland a zone of immediate need and worked with Kaiser to quickly recruit 10,000 workers from across the United States. By the end of the war, industry and government had brought 160,000 newcomers to a city whose prewar population had hovered at about 406,000.¹

Portlanders were concerned not only with the sheer number of in-migrants but also with their demographic composition—or rather, their perceived demographic composition. By September 1943, Kaiser and the War Manpower Commission had brought in 7,760 people from the Northeast, 3,901 from the Midwest, and 4,289 from the South to work in Portland's shipyards. Citizens and city officials scornfully referred to the entire cohort as Okies and considered them undeserving of public services or common courtesies.

More alarming to Portlanders was the number of African Americans among the migrants. Though African Americans made up less than 1 percent of the newcomers arriving before March 1943, they were conspicuous to Portlanders, whose black community had never exceeded 2,500. The migration expanded the black community rapidly, so that by 1944 Portland's African American population had reached 11,000. Portland became a different city with new industries and a new population, raising anxieties about the community's future. Projections of a destitute postwar Portland abounded, as did images of the newcomers as agents of crime, vice, backwardness, miscegenation, and parasitic dependency who would drain the city of its vital resources.²

The migrants' labor, however, was critical to an Allied victory, and hostility from established residents, in addition to substandard housing and limited public services, threatened the pace of ship production. When Portlanders' overdrawn and stereotypic images of newcomers became an identifiable problem, the Portland Art Museum (PAM) retooled its operations and collaborated with industry on a series of special exhibitions. Their aim was to change Portlanders' impressions of the new labor force.

The first exhibition, *Wartime Housing*, took on the problem of established Portlanders' decades-long resistance to public housing programs. The second exhibition, *Ships for Victory*, addressed Portlanders' apprehensions about the strangers at the Kaiser shipyards. The third exhibition, *the Migration of the Negro*, centered on the most highly charged issue of the day: Portlanders' resistance to integrating black newcomers into the community.³ On the whole, PAM's wartime programming succeeded in constructing a vision of Portland as a tolerant and patriotic industrial community, but the museum's commentary on the place of African Americans was ambiguous at best. The dissonances in PAM's wartime exhibitions had little to do with artistic issues, stemming instead from deep uncertainty about what an industrialized, multiethnic Portland should look like as its residents pulled together in the great fight for global democracy. Portland was one of many northern cities that both reviled southern racism and clung fiercely to its own segregationist customs and discriminatory practices. These tensions were as pervasive in Portland's cultural life as in its social life, despite the heartfelt desire among exhibition organizers to combat racism in both areas.

One of Portland's early complaints about the migrants was expressed in aesthetic terms. At issue were the federal war housing projects slated for construction to alleviate the severe housing crisis that accompanied the shipyard workers' arrival. Public housing had been a hot topic in Portland for more than 20 years, with advocates condemning as blights shantytowns on Willamette River islands and in gulches near downtown bridges. Real-estate interests, fearing that housing projects would drive down property values, had long hobbled the public housing movement by labeling its leaders

dangerous communist radicals.⁴

The housing crisis of 1942 was of such stunning magnitude, however, that the question was no longer one of whether there should be public housing but of where and how quickly units could be constructed. The urgency mounted as masses of newcomers camped out in cars, trailers, and shacks across Portland's tidy urban landscape. One woman wrote to an interned Japanese American friend that Portland's population had exploded overnight, filling the sidewalks with "swarms of roughly-dressed, roughly-acting people." Although most Portlanders would rather these "rough people" be properly housed, they usually associated public housing with urban slums—particularly those inhabited by ethnic minorities. In these residents' opinion, the only thing worse than having homeless migrants swarming about town would be to live near the public housing projects that would get the migrants off the streets.⁵

These perceptions fueled a territorial battle in North Portland in early 1942, when the Federal Public Housing Authority (FPHA) announced plans to build a dormitory for single black workers. White residents picketed, blocked construction, and pressured their congressmen to intervene. Officials determined it wiser to scrap the project than to risk escalating the conflict.⁶ They were acutely aware of events in Detroit, where white residents protested the construction of the Sojourner Truth Homes—the only public housing open to blacks in the city—in a "white neighborhood."⁷ The disruption of war production and exposure of the hypocrisies inherent in Jim Crow war housing were every official's greatest nightmares.

The situation grew contentious in Portland during the spring

of 1942 as Henry J. Kaiser, fearing his homeless workers would leave Portland, entered into an unusual partnership with the U.S. Maritime Commission and the FPHA. The innovative shipbuilder and the federal government took the war housing concept a step further by planning an entire city, set apart from Portland, to house the newly arrived workers.

Less than one year after blueprints were drawn, Vanport City was ready for occupancy, and the nation marveled at America's largest, most ambitious public housing project. Vanport was equipped with 10,000 furnished apartments for workers and their families, who would have access to medical services, shopping, laundry facilities, recreational programming, and 24-hour childcare. Although the workers' standard of living was clearly a matter of concern, Vanport was designed primarily to channel workers' energies into round-the-clock shipbuilding. Concentrating migrant workers in a separate enclave also afforded Kaiser and the Housing Authority ease in surveillance and social control. The Housing Authority could (and did) summarily evict residents guilty of absenteeism, drinking, gambling, interracial fraternization, or "dangerous" political activity. But no one thought about such things on Vanport's opening day, when 35,000 Kaiser employees and family members, including 2,159 African Americans, settled into their units. There was great jubilation at this public housing miracle, and all eyes were on the project to see how the experiment would fare.⁸

Portlanders, though thrilled to be in the national spotlight, voiced a range of negative presentiments about Vanport's influence on life in Portland. Some bemoaned the coming of a government-sponsored eyesore, and others saw Vanport as the seed of a permanent welfare colony. Although Portland had a substantial population of working-class renters, home



Vanport City was built to help house the thousands of people who migrated to Portland to work in the Kaiser shipyards during World War II. (Oregon Historical Society, CN 006206)

ownership lay at the heart of its middle-class self-image. The 1940 city directory described Portland as “a city of homes, where the people take particular pride in making it known that without home life no progress can be made in growth as well as grandeur.” Portlanders were disdainful of their shipyard migrants, but they brought levity to their plight with jokes like “Don’t forget to flush the toilet—Vanport needs the water.” More serious was Multnomah County officials’ refusal to fund voter registration at Vanport because migrant southerners were “not fit to vote.”⁹

Though the press urged Portlanders to think about the migration as a second Oregon Trail, the metaphor left an unclear picture of the future. Robert Tyler Davis, director of the Portland Art Museum, sprang into action by seeking visual material to aid Portlanders in seeing recent changes in a positive light. The task would require great care on the part of curators, given the hostility between Portland’s established community and new workers. Davis, though relatively new to Portland, was well suited for the challenge. After completing his studies at Harvard University, he taught at the school’s Fogg Art Museum until taking an assistant directorship at the University of Rochester Art Gallery. While there, he was roundly praised for being among the first curators to collaborate with local community groups on art education programs. When Davis came to Portland in 1939, his predecessor, Otis B. Wight, noted his talent for making museums relevant to community life and predicted that Davis would “start a new era of activities in the Portland Museum.” Wight’s prediction proved true three years later, when the wartime director forged new alliances between the museum, industry, and community groups to mount exhibitions that raised PAM’s profile among western art museums.¹⁰

Davis’s inspiration came from a traveling exhibition from the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, a city with a long history of negotiating class and ethnic conflicts. MOMA was one of the first American museums to retool itself for wartime, by joining forces with the Office of War Information and other federal agencies. Together, the worlds of art, industry, and government developed an exhibition format they called “propaganda for freedom” with the aim of providing an aestheticized, patriotic perspective on home front discomforts.¹¹

MOMA curators began with unremarkable everyday objects such as tools, furniture, and maps: nothing was off-limits if it brought viewers in touch with an aspect of the war effort. The artistry was in the installation, lighting, and wall text describing each object, which were sufficiently dramatic to highlight the beauty of the odd array of objects. Among the most widely viewed of these exhibitions was Wartime Housing, organized in 1942 at the request of federal housing agencies alarmed by public resistance to project construction. MOMA presented

the flimsy prefab structures as a milestone on the path to progress, along which “bad public housing of the past” evolves into “good public housing of the present and future.” The *New Yorker*, clearly taken with the promise of wartime public housing, described the exhibition in oddly vivid terms:

One first passes through darkened rooms, where one confronts pictures of squalor, overcrowding, and disorder, and one emerges into daylight, openness, and the planned towns of the future. As one walks past the big, simple photographs that tell part of the story, voices explain what it is all about, a clock ticks ominously to remind one that time is passing, the sound of hammers and saws is audible, and brave music finally proclaims the promised lands, spotted with communities planned on a modern pattern.¹²

MOMA—with the aid of its collaborators and reviewers—created visions of prefabricated promised lands that would be attainable for all Americans, so long as industry, federal agencies, and the public unflinchingly supported war housing. Instead of making an artistic statement about the Vanports of America, MOMA struck a deal with the gallery-going public: if they embraced public housing now, their sacrifice would be rewarded with victory overseas and an improved standard of living at home. But the clock was ticking, both inside the gallery and out.¹³

Wartime Housing traveled to cities in which public opposition was delaying the housing program. Portland, whose antihousing protests were as conspicuous as Vanport itself, sat near the top of the list. Though Davis welcomed Wartime Housing, he doubted whether a New York exhibition could win over anxious Portlanders. Vanport, after all, was not just the largest war housing project in the country; it would also, once populated, become Oregon’s second largest city. Realizing the enormity of this fact, PAM added its own complementary exhibition to Wartime Housing to address Portland’s specific concerns. Davis approved the installation of blueprints and models of Portland’s war housing projects to counter complaints that they would be thoughtlessly laid out. Wall text emphasized that the projects were well designed and offered all the amenities of modern living. The models showed that Vanport units were demountable, suggesting that the project could be instantly moved or dismantled if the feared social evils ever emerged.¹⁴

Representatives from local government, the Portland Chamber of Commerce, social service agencies, and local universities gave gallery talks with such titles as “Housing Is a Community Job” and “Housing Is for Human Living,” which generated considerable interest throughout the community. Citizens and civic leaders had their first opportunity to debate the benefits and costs of wartime housing and the pros and cons of establishing permanent public housing programs. Davis’s first foray into wartime exhibition design and public education created the opportunity for an unprec-



Wartime exhibitions used ordinary industrial objects to valorize war production. Among the highlights of *Ships for Victory* was the lifeboat in the sculpture gallery. (1943 PAM Exhibition, *Ships for Victory*, Portland Art Museum)

edented exchange between Portland's cultural center and institutions as removed from the world of fine art as the Housing Authority, the Bonneville Power Administration, the Oregon Institute of Architects, the Kaiser shipyards, and local government. Suddenly, the museum became a forum for education and debate as much as a place to view works of art.¹⁵

Although the reviewer for the *Oregonian* praised Wartime Housing's intriguing juxtaposition of images of slums with models displaying "attractive interiors, good laundry, medical, school and play facilities in mass housing projects," the exhibition was hardly a blockbuster. Its greatest influence on Portland's social and cultural scene was the impetus it gave Davis to mount similar exhibitions. While visitors viewed Wartime Housing in the gallery, in PAM's adminis-

trative offices museum staff and Kaiser representatives were organizing an original, homegrown exhibition called *Ships for Victory*. The intention behind the new exhibition was to use meticulously fashioned images to depict shipyard workers as agents of patriotism and progress. Like Wartime Housing, *Ships for Victory* relied on its installation design and wall text to elevate war materiel to the status of high art and cultural artifact. Presenting shipbuilders as both artisans and artistic subjects would, Davis theorized, aestheticize the people whom Portlanders associated with the ugliness of shantytowns and social chaos.¹⁶

PAM adapted the experiential installation design of Wartime Housing by building the interiors of two galleries to look like portions of ships and shipyards. Curators arranged everything from shipboard equipment to photographs of shipbuilders in narrative sequence to take viewers through each stage of the shipbuilding process. Viewers started with a section called Drafting and Patterns, where photographs of engineers looking at blueprints graced the walls. Next was the scaled-down Plate Shop, with a display of bending rolls (used to shape flat pieces of steel) encircled by images of welders at work. After passing through the Machine Shop and the Pipe Shop, visitors reached the culmination at the section called the Ways, where wall labels gleefully announced, "She Floats!" Its seaworthiness confirmed, the ship was outfitted with anchors, life rafts, cold-storage lockers, and flags. Luminous, moody pho-

tographs of Liberty ships off to sea lent a dramatic aura to an otherwise rather dry presentation. In all, *Ships for Victory* made an industrial process a thing of beauty, undertaken as a labor of love of country (and not for wages or profits). Most important, the exhibition recast shipyard workers as agents of progress, not parasites poised to drag Portland downward or backward.¹⁷

The role the Kaiser Shipbuilding Corporation played in developing the exhibition was as unusual as the installation itself. In addition to providing \$500 and agreeing to lend several objects for the show, Kaiser made its own artwork, photographing yard activity for the sole purpose of display in *Ships for Victory*. By the time the final object list was completed, *Ships for Victory* violated nearly every curatorial convention and would by no means have been considered a wor-

thy exhibition for a museum of art but for the exigencies of the war. At no other time would a museum director boast, "We have a completely rigged plywood lifeboat in full scarlet sail, installed in the sculpture court." Nor would a director be likely to accept curatorial direction from a shipbuilder. Davis admitted that "there are many people who feel that it is not quite 'art'" but noted that "many of the photographs are first rate, and it seems to me a good thing to do just now."¹⁸

What MOMA would have called "public-private propaganda for freedom" PAM and Kaiser described as "a gesture for community goodwill" toward newcomers and established Portlanders alike. But goodwill gestures could do only so much to quell mounting racial tensions when Portland's African American population reached three times its prewar number. Segregation, discrimination, and the pervasive threat of racial violence became so pronounced that a writer for *Crisis*, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), described Portland as "an outpost of the South in many respects."¹⁹ Many yard workers concurred. A newcomer from Mississippi declared that the only difference between Portland and his hometown was that he could count all the White Trade Only signs from the *front* of the bus. Another worker was demoralized by the black community being profiled as likely Axis or communist subversives, making him subject to heightened surveillance and police harassment. Despite the absence of full-blown race riots in Portland, the presumption of black subversion gave new life to old stereotypes of savage treachery posing an unending threat to a respectable American community.²⁰

Even longtime black residents admitted some wariness of the southern newcomers, lest their "backward" southern ways revive old prejudices that they had worked decades to extinguish. Black newcomers exhibited hostilities of their own toward black Portlanders, blaming established African Americans for having allowed racism to flourish in a northern city. As Portland's racial climate became stormier, an act of goodwill toward—and education about the vital contributions of—African American workers was urgently needed.²¹

Once again, MOMA had a relevant exhibition—a series of 60 panels by the African American painter Jacob Lawrence titled *The Migration of the Negro*. The *Migration* series depicts the journeys of black southerners recruited for defense jobs in an unreceptive North during World War I. The history of the Great Migration was one with which the 23-year-old painter was intimately familiar. Lawrence was born in Atlantic City in 1917 to migrants from Virginia and South Carolina, and his childhood memories were peppered with fragments of stories of tenant farmers, arduous travels, and adjustments to city life. The family's move to Harlem in 1930 afforded Lawrence two avenues for exploring those frag-

ments of his past. The first was the Harlem Art Workshop, sponsored by the Work Projects Administration (WPA), where he studied under the Harlem Renaissance painter Charles Alston. The second was the Schomburg collection of African American resources at the New York Public Library, where Lawrence spent countless hours of self-directed study, reading everything he could on African American history. Under Alston's tutelage, Lawrence's painting evolved from personal visual explorations to strong artistic and social statements.²²

The young artist gained recognition as something of a history painter by bringing relatively unknown major figures in African American history such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman into the public consciousness. The common thread of these works was the relevance of their themes to contemporary issues. Lawrence asserted repeatedly that his use of historical subjects was intended not as a mere remembrance but as a means of recovering black history and placing it within America's master narrative. "I don't see how a history of the United States can be written honestly without including the Negro," he explained. "I believe these things tie up with the Negro today. We don't have a physical slavery, but an economic slavery."²³

When his early work landed him a show at New York's Downtown Gallery, Lawrence became the only black artist to have gallery representation and among the few shown as a modernist and not a token "Negro artist." His social statements had a great impact and sparked a heated debate among critics about whether Lawrence misused his artist's credentials to generate propaganda under cover of fine art. The scholar Alain Locke, the cultural and social mentor of the Harlem Renaissance, rejected the term *propaganda* as a slight to Lawrence's true achievement—the transformation of political and social history into works of art. Locke's assessment of Lawrence's ambitions could have described those of the PAM director Robert Tyler Davis just as aptly. Both sought to harness the power of images to alter public perceptions of migrant defense workers, and both believed the gallery was the most appropriate arena for direct social commentary.²⁴

Though Lawrence and Davis might have had similar goals, the means by which they achieved them were vastly different. Lawrence breathed life into historical scenes with his unique style, which he called dynamic cubism. Dynamic cubism modified European and American modernist conventions while incorporating forms, colors, and symbols reminiscent of African American folk art. This synthesis provided a new visual language that both black and white viewers could read, albeit somewhat differently. Lawrence composed scenarios in eye-catching colors with appealing folk figures and a dynamism. The compositions thus appear simple, yet they work in

an enormously complex way. As one scholar points out, their flatness melds figure and background, and it takes a discerning eye to make out the scene. Once fully engaged with the painting, the viewer is placed amid the complex social realities that its subjects struggle to negotiate.²⁵

The first panels of the *Migration* series attempt to convey the size and scope of the migration. Each panel's title serves as a caption so that the viewer can understand the context within which Lawrence sets these otherwise puzzling images. The series opens with an image of a train station full of black figures, all dressed in their best. The crowd gathers around the gates for trains heading to northern cities. Lawrence shows the movement of the figures by pitching them forward and by pointing their gaze away from the viewer; everyone is departing and no one is looking back. Panels 2 through 7 show viewers the pull to the north, with images of a white industrial laborer bearing the impossible burden of production alone; of black southern rural workers, the last untapped industrial labor source; and of sleek trains barreling through the night with black passengers, whose fare had been paid by northern industries. The next 20 panels give a startlingly clear picture of the conditions that migrants were fleeing. Boll weevils, lynch mobs, empty food bowls, exploitive landlords, and the bowed heads of despairing black figures make the northern labor recruiter appear the rescuer in panel 28 (that is, until the viewer learns in the next panel that the agents were also recruiting strikebreakers).

The second half of the series, beginning with panel 31, deals with the commingling of opportunity and oppression that characterized migrants' life in the North. Neat, geometric housing units were an improvement over rickety shacks. Jobs in the steel and railroad industries paid well and were plentiful and steady, so migrants urged their southern relatives to join them. A panel showing large cuts of meat and bearing the caption "Living conditions were better in the North" is followed by a scene of a smiling family looking out the window of their train car as they pass the first of Pittsburgh's towering smokestacks standing tall on the horizon. The panel evokes images of hopeful immigrants passing the Statue of Liberty on the way to Ellis Island. The artistic and emotional exuberance fades again with images of crowded, windowless, unpainted housing, only to pick up energy in panels 50 to 52 with fires and race riots bursting across the canvas in bright colors and sharp, angular forms. The final panels take the viewer on a rapid course of ups and downs as migrants form communities centered around religious, educational, and mutual aid institutions. The final panel, like panel 1, shows an endless stream of anonymous black people at the train station and bears the caption "And the migrants kept coming."²⁶

Although Davis would come to call the *Migration* series "one

of the best pieces of propaganda painting of modern times," its message was starkly different from the uncomplicated one in *Ships for Victory*.²⁷ The *Migration* series gave as much insight into wartime labor as *Ships for Victory*, but racism was an aspect of the industry that Kaiser and the federal government hoped to downplay. In attempting to avoid the sort of racial strife that slows production, the federal government condemned Jim Crow on paper while turning a blind eye to racist acts. Executive Order 8802 was intended to protect black workers from discrimination in defense plants, but unions segregated them into "Negro auxiliaries," which limited their access to skilled positions. By 1943, hundreds of workers protesting the auxiliaries had been fired.

African Americans were promised integrated housing and equal accommodations in government projects, yet Vanport officials mapped out white housing near the center of town and black housing at the periphery. Government propaganda called for unity among blacks and whites in the factories, but Vanporters caught crossing the color line were detained, interrogated, and sometimes evicted. To the dismay of many black newcomers, the web of opportunity and oppression at the heart of Lawrence's painting was as much a feature of life in Vanport as the industrial efficiency depicted in Kaiser's photos was a feature of work in the yards. So although the *Migration* series had much to say about the conditions for war workers, it, unlike *Ships for Victory*, was not about war work. It was about how war work changed black laborers' lives for better and for worse. At best, Lawrence's painting complicated the message in *Ships for Victory* and at worst posed a dangerous challenge to it.²⁸

Davis initially declined the *Migration* series, citing a lack of gallery space because of the *Ships for Victory* exhibition. However, when the Young Women's Christian Association of North Portland (known as "the Negro YWCA") proposed exhibiting the series in its downtown building, two blocks from the museum, he reversed his position and agreed that PAM would sponsor and help organize the exhibit. The purpose of this plan was to allow visitors to view both exhibitions on the same day and to offer the two as parallel narratives. The trouble was, each institution saw different parallels in the exhibitions without realizing it. The YWCA announced in its press release that the exhibition would foster "a deeper understanding of problems of Negroes" and would "help to promote community welfare through releases of tensions of the times, better relations between all races and appreciation of cultural achievement."²⁹

Davis was fully in favor of promoting community welfare and honoring cultural achievement, but his institution was obligated to aid Kaiser and the federal government in containing, not releasing, the "tensions of the times," as it had with Wartime Housing. This obligation made PAM's support



Panel 45 of Jacob Lawrence's *Migration* series shows a family of black southerners recruited for defense jobs heading north during World War I. (Phillips Collection, ©2004 Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

of the YWCA's exhibition a potentially thorny problem. To make a clear, nonthreatening presentation of Lawrence's themes, PAM would need to answer some questions: Was the museum supporting a separate "black" exhibition? Or was it asking all viewers to take a broad view of their immediate social circumstances? Should the *Migration* series be used to promote an empathic view of the "other" or a critical view of "elsewhere," or should it be used to encourage Portlanders to take a hard look in the mirror? These questions unanswered, the propagandists were never able to clarify what their intent was and hence what their message would be.

Nevertheless, the *Migration of the Negro* opened in May and *Ships for Victory* in June, with a few days' overlap in the two runs. Although the two exhibitions were conceived as parallels, PAM promoted them hierarchically. The museum devoted the first page of its spring membership bulletin to *Ships for Victory*, which it called a lavish industrial epic. The descriptions of the images on display were so laudatory that the pieces sounded far grander than the Picassos and Mirós that PAM had recently exhibited. The museum promised that

"machines towering to the skies, trucks mammoth in size, cranes almost human have been created for this. In the exhibition we see these mammoths in action and the ship growing in her berth, as pieces of her structures are set in place and welded together." The write-up on the *Migration of the Negro* ran on page two. The synopsis of the narrative contained the bland description "Simple in form and color, packed with feeling and intensity, the story makes a tremendous impact on the observer." The promotional campaigns primed viewers to expect a great thrill from *Ships for Victory* and a "tremendous impact" of some sort from the *Migration* series.³⁰

Public events for the two exhibitions were remarkably different as well. The opening celebration for the *Migration of the Negro* was a pleasant affair that featured remarks from Davis and a concert by the Bethel AME Church choir. The centerpiece of the programming for the exhibition was a panel discussion, whose participants included black United Service Organizations (USO) officials and white representatives of the National Resources Planning Board and Vanport public schools. The panelists devised such topics as "the economic



Two boys study a wetsuit at the Ships for Victory exhibition. The Portland Art Museum promoted Ships for Victory much more than it did the controversial Migration of the Negro exhibition. (1943 PAM Exhibition, Ships for Victory, Portland Art Museum)

and social hardships caused by segregation and racial prejudice,” “the effects of segregation on black workers,” “the various defense mechanisms [African Americans] built up because of [their] problems,” and “the economic outlook for migrant labor in general with the proviso that the fundamental problems involving the Negro find some sort of solution first.” By all accounts, the panel was stimulating and informative and the ensuing discussion fruitful. In a congratulatory letter to Davis, the MOMA curator Elodie Courter noted, “You might avoid some of Detroit’s problems by just such cooperative efforts as the discussion group arranged for this exhibition. You have *all my admiration!*”³¹

The concentration on social ills at the opening of the Lawrence exhibition set a very different tone from the events that opened Ships for Victory the following week. Portland’s leading officials, businessmen, and socialites attended the festivities, where they toasted the museum, the shipyards, the industrial work force, and the city of Portland. After the opening gala, PAM made unusually great efforts to draw workers to the exhibition by extending evening hours for those on the day shift and encouraging them to wear their overalls and hardhats in the gallery. Museum officials declared that the notion of a shipyard worker taking time to go home and change into city clothes was “crazy” and that “a little bit of grease on the museum floor would be a welcome change.”³² Anyone who has spent any time in a museum would have to question the sincerity of this comment, but on a symbolic level it was an invitation for working-class newcomers to enter the center of established middle-class society and culture. The invitation was a call for assimilation,

whereas the separateness of the locale and content of the Migration of the Negro suggested that the black community and culture should be held at a distance from the white mainstream. In the end, Ships for Victory was a joyous, inclusive exhibition, while the Migration of the Negro was a sober meditation on “black” problems in a “black” cultural space, when it could have been a celebration of an accomplished American artist.

Davis and his collaborators did successfully recast shipyard workers as heroes of war production and Kaiser’s ships as the pride of Portland. The patriotic message of Ships for Victory was clear because the organizers generated the works themselves and enjoyed extraordinary control over their presentation. The images of black workers in Lawrence’s paintings, by contrast, were already fixed to the canvas, described in the captions, and contextualized within the narrative of the series. Although these elements make the exhibition appear impervious to curatorial influences, Davis’s choices about where to display the *Migration* series undermined any intended integrationist statement. By segregating Lawrence’s work at the YWCA, Davis bypassed the opportunity to place black workers in the same narrative frame as the shipbuilding in Ships for Victory. As a separate exhibition, the Migration of the Negro made it fairly easy for white viewers to distance themselves by relegating the narrative to the past, to another place, or to the realm of “black” issues.

Davis’s most significant choice, however, was in making the Migration of the Negro an exhibition secondary in importance to Ships for Victory. Placing the work of a celebrated black artist below lifeboats on the visual and promotional hierarchy is a statement in itself—one that might have been avoided had the *Migration* series been incorporated into the Ships for Victory exhibition. From a purely structural point of view, the exhibitions promoted acceptance for workers and empathy and tolerance for African Americans but stopped short of projecting the racial equality that the YWCA was promoting and that the double-victory campaigners (who believed they could defeat racial oppression at home by fighting fascism abroad) hoped mainstream Americans would come to support. So Davis’s original problem was half solved: the museum gave Portlanders a usable vision of themselves as an industrial community but not as a multiethnic one.

Though there is no scientific means of measuring the influence of each exhibition on the average Portlander—or the degree to which viewers connected Ships for Victory and the Migration of the Negro—it is clear that each exhibition made different impressions on Portland viewers. Ships for Victory attracted more than 27,000 visitors and was extended through the month of July. The newspaper reviews were glowing, each focusing on different elements of the exhibition. The *Journal of Commerce* raved about the signal flags, which

gave “further excitement to truly an inspiring show.” The *Oregon Journal* reviewer Frances Blakely also applauded the flags’ “gaiety and festivity” while complimenting the life-sized donut raft, steering wheel, telegraphic controls, funnels, and wooden template. Blakely admired the photographs of workers in action as well, making special mention of the “splendid portrait of the first woman welder in the whole country.”³³

Its curatorial innovations garnered PAM great acclaim from museums across the country, who lined up to book *Ships for Victory* for their venues. The first to book the exhibition was the San Francisco Museum of Art, a leading institution in a city whose wartime boom mirrored Portland’s. Davis was elected president of the Western Association of Art Museum Directors in 1946 in recognition of his inventive wartime ventures (interestingly, Davis credited PAM’s success to Portlanders’ characteristic “impervious[ness] to what the art magazines say”). In its own way, *Ships for Victory* scored a double victory: in addition to addressing Portland’s most pressing social problem, the exhibition gave Portland unprecedented status among the West’s more cosmopolitan cultural centers.³⁴

The *Migration of the Negro*, though considered a success, had nowhere near the same attendance as *Ships for Victory*, nor did it attract the same amount of publicity or regional interest. The YWCA was pleased to record nearly 200 attendees and agreed with Davis’s contention that lasting changes would spring from the discussions generated by the series. In a note of thanks to Davis, an organizer from the YWCA remarked that the successful exhibition “was the result of our conscientious thinking, planning, and working together. We are, of course, proud of these facts and grateful to you for your share in the undertaking.” Davis also saw the *Migration of the Negro* as an educational success, though he saw a different set of aims being met. In his glowing report to MOMA, Davis focused on panel 53, whose caption reads, “The Negroes who had been North for quite some time met their fellowmen with disgust and aloofness.” Davis wrote that this panel had eased the “tensions and disturbances in the Negro community” that arose with the migration to Portland. Davis also applauded the educational value of the series to the “good many Southerners coming,” who he suggested were the main agents of white racism. The hardhatted Portlanders and their established middle-class neighbors who made up PAM’s *Ships for Victory* viewership received no mention as the target audience for the *Migration of the Negro*.³⁵

One thing Davis did recognize in the *Migration* series was Lawrence’s significance as an artist. In November 1943, Davis made Lawrence’s work a permanent part of Portland’s cultural life with the purchase of 5 paintings from his 30 images depicting life in Harlem. The *Harlem* series uses narra-

tive devices and visual references similar to those of the *Migration* series to depict the complex realities of life in the city, where the “New Negro” was supposedly thriving. PAM’s publicity department described the visual and social content of the work in a straightforward social critique, which it had never done when discussing the *Migration* series: “The pervading emotion is horror and tragic despair. . . . It is not possible in words to reproduce the quality of these panels, nor to give any idea of the emotional value of the colors and the simple design. They are a powerful indictment of man’s inhumanity to man.”³⁶

Perhaps the power of Lawrence’s work was easier to acknowledge when the images it depicted could be viewed as the result of someone else’s inhumanity and the setting was 3,000 miles away, in a city with which Portland contrasted itself. Perhaps it helped that the series ends on a hopeful note, with a panel titled “The people are beginning to organize. They want a good Harlem.” By ending with images of blacks organizing for improvement, the *Harlem* series depicts a black community that is neither powerless nor without responsibility for the course of its future. While the impending waves of migrants in the last panel of the *Migration* series extend the black–white, established resident–newcomer encounter beyond the narrative frame, the activists of the last panel of the *Harlem* series allow viewers to remain detached from the scene, able to wish the subjects well and walk away.

Despite the relative harmlessness of the *Harlem* series, the museum’s publicity department saw enough incendiary potential to censor portions of Davis’s original press release. The last paragraph of the original read,

If one may epitomize the emotion in these paintings, it is horror coupled with despair. There is no alleviation of the terrible indictment of man’s inhumanity to man. And perhaps the greatest horror comes from the realization that Lawrence’s indictment and the facts on which it is based are both true and deserved.³⁷

The *Harlem* series did not pose the danger to the delicate threads of industrial unity that the *Migration* series did. There were no clear references to white Portlanders’ social circumstances, nor were there educational panels or any of the other trappings of the *Migration* series. This time, the museum focused solely on Lawrence’s abilities as a painter, which was sensible from both the propagandist’s and the peacetime curator’s point of view.

With the war’s end, Portland and its institutions snapped back to their prewar operations and celebrated the return to normalcy as much as the victory itself. Kaiser scaled back production until only one shipyard remained open. The FPHA returned housing construction to the purview of local real-estate interests. Vanport’s population dropped precipitously as thousands of white war workers returned to

their place of origin. White workers who stayed in Portland were absorbed into the community and over time became indistinct from their long-established counterparts. Upon leaving Vanport, most blacks moved to the traditional African American enclave of Albina, which was bound tightly by real-estate agents' red lines. The remaining Vanporters were victims of a devastating flood in 1948 that washed away the project, leaving hundreds of family without resources. Once again, the problem of dealing with an overwhelming wave of newcomers reached a crisis point. This being peacetime, however, the Portland Art Museum returned to business as usual. Curators brought the masterworks out of storage, resumed putting on traditional exhibitions, and reclaimed the sculpture garden for afternoon teas with major donors.³⁸ Portland's racial and class conflicts all but disappeared from the galleries and were once again negotiated in the halls of government, often out of view of the typical gallery-goer.

Despite Portlanders' determination to return to prewar life, remnants of the home front were firmly embedded in the community. Vanport was gone, but public housing re-

mained. Thousands of defense workers returned to their prewar homes, but those who remained stood at the vanguard of progressive politics and local civil rights movements. PAM's impressionists returned to prominence in the gallery, but they were accompanied by Jacob Lawrence. And as imperfect as it may have been, Portland had a vision of itself as a multiethnic, industrial community. Portland mirrored its wartime exhibitions by placing white laborers squarely within the mainstream and casting a favorable light on blacks who worked hard and kept to the margins.

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4. Abbott, 110, 118-19; E. Kimbark MacColl, *The Growth of a City: Power and Politics in Portland, Oregon, 1915-1950* (Portland, 1979), 460, 468; Stuart McDerry, "Building a West Coast Ghetto: African-American Housing in Portland, 1910-1960," *PNQ*, Vol. 92 (2001), 137-48.
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